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MIT and Gender Bias: Following Up on Victory

By NANCY HOPKINS

In March, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology released a document called "A Study on the Status of Women Faculty in Science at MIT," which reported on gender discrimination against female faculty members in its School of Science. The process that produced the report began five years ago, when some of the 15 tenured female faculty members in science -- of whom I was one -- started to collect evidence that their male peers had received a disproportionate share of laboratory space and resources for research.

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That evidence led to the creation of the Committee on Women Faculty in the School of Science, which in turn documented that -- through subtle and largely unconscious discrimination -- most of the senior female professors in the school had received lower salaries and fewer resources for research than their male counterparts, and had been excluded from significant roles within their departments. Once the committee presented its preliminary findings to Robert J. Birgeneau, the dean of the school, in 1995, he took prompt action to redress inequities.

He first addressed problems that can seriously impede productivity in research and teaching, and he redistributed more equally the benefits that signal institutional respect for faculty members. For example, a number of senior women who had been underpaid received salary increases; several women who had not received discretionary funds from the administration for years got money for research; some women got more space; and some got funds for renovations of their labs or offices. Birgeneau also worked with department heads to insure that female professors were asked to join committees involved in hiring new faculty members, and he helped several departments recruit new senior female professors.

Those efforts have led to an increase in the number of female faculty members in science, most notably in tenured positions. They also have improved the professional lives of many tenured women. As one professor told me recently, "I had decided to leave M.I.T., but when they showed that they appreciated me and my area of research, I decided to stay. As a result of the dean's and the department head's actions over the past two years, we have become the No. 1 department in my field in the country. I am extremely happy here now."

"I was unhappy at M.I.T. for more than a decade," another woman had commented earlier. "I thought it was the price you paid if you wanted to be a scientist at an elite academic institution. After the committee formed and the dean responded, my life began to change. My research blossomed, my funding tripled. Now I love every aspect of my job. It is hard to understand how I survived those years -- or why."

Until this March, the work of the Committee on Women Faculty in the School of Science had been largely unknown at M.I.T. Determined that its successes be publicized more widely, Lotte

Bailyn, chair of the M.I.T. faculty, encouraged the dean and members of the committee to produce a report on its work that would protect the confidentiality of the data that the committee had collected. That was the report released in March. It was accompanied by comments from Charles M. Vest, president of M.I.T.; Dean Birgeneau; and Professor Bailyn. All three accepted the conclusion that female faculty members had been the object of gender discrimination. Further, the administration praised the courage and leadership of the women who had brought the problem to light.

The response to the report's release was unanticipated. Within days, the report and the administration's endorsement of its conclusions received front-page coverage in *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*. Numerous articles and editorials soon followed in newspapers around the country. I was invited to the White House, where President and Mrs. Clinton and Labor Secretary Alexis M. Herman praised the courage of the M.I.T. administration and the tenured female faculty members in science, and expressed their hope that M.I.T.'s handling of gender discrimination could serve as a model for other institutions.

The report also elicited an outpouring of e-mail messages to administrators and female faculty members at M.I.T. who had been involved in the study. Many messages congratulated M.I.T. on its honesty; many also reported that gender discrimination is alive and well at the writers' institutions, too. The most moving messages came from women who had conducted studies of gender bias on their own campuses, or who had fought discrimination as individuals, only to be told by their administrators that their perceptions and data were wrong, that there was no gender discrimination. A number of those cases have led to lawsuits.

Together, the messages suggest that gender bias is widespread in academe, and they raise the possibility that it is present in medicine, the law, and business as well. At the White House, where I listened to women who work in diverse occupations, I learned that the problem may be universal in the workplace.

The release of the report has already led to efforts to analyze the status of female faculty members at M.I.T.'s other schools. Robert A. Brown, the provost, and Lawrence S. Bacow, the chancellor, have stated that they are committed to working for meaningful change.

Given the successes in the School of Science; the support of the president, provost, and chancellor; and the positive response to the report, one might think that gender bias has been eradicated at M.I.T. Although I believe the events I have described may prove to be a quantum leap toward a solution, the changes so far have come from above, while the problem of gender bias that the committee documented originates at the level of the departments. Have significant changes occurred at that level?

In some departments where the dean worked closely with administrators to reverse and prevent the marginalization of tenured female faculty members, there appears to be a heightened awareness of gender discrimination. However, within M.I.T., the most striking response to the release of "A Study on the Status of Women Faculty in Science at MIT" has been profound silence. Worse, some administrators have stated that gender bias does not exist in their departments or centers. Thus, at the level where discrimination is practiced, it appears that little has changed. The lack of understanding that precipitated the initiative in the first place, and that apparently has been common at other institutions as well, is still present in some parts of M.I.T.

While disappointing, perhaps such a response should not be

surprising. The senior female faculty members and the three men who served on the committee spent many dozens of hours documenting and discussing gender bias. But the roughly 900 remaining faculty members at M.I.T., including about 225 in the School of Science who did not participate in the report, did not have the benefit of that experience. Some faculty members may find it difficult to accept the conclusions of others about the existence of gender bias. Some female faculty members suspect that the silence around us exists because many of our colleagues do not yet believe, or at least do not understand, the results of the report.

Besides not having had the benefit of participating in in-depth discussions of the data, many faculty members have had few opportunities to observe gender bias at M.I.T. We have learned that recognizing discrimination -- no matter how egregious -- against a single woman is difficult. Nor is it usually sufficient to open one's eyes to understanding how unconscious assumptions concerning gender can result in inequalities between male and female faculty members. Because most departmental administrators deal with only a few female professors -- who are rare at M.I.T. -- they can easily fail to see the pattern of discrimination that emerged when data for all of the tenured women in science were pooled. Many administrators assume, incorrectly, that they will be able to detect bias if it is occurring in their departments. Not only is that untrue, but those individuals may even be a source of bias.

If many faculty members and administrators are still unable to recognize subtle gender bias, how can the changes that took place in the School of Science be made permanent? The committee recognized that reforms could easily be undone if Dean Birgeneau and many of the committee members were to leave the school. Therefore, the members wrote a set of recommendations to try to institutionalize the progress that has occurred. Those recommendations include continuous monitoring of data by administrators and female professors to insure equity, placing female faculty members on search committees and in decision-making positions within departments, and removing administrators who knowingly discriminate against female faculty members.

It was to help insure permanent change by educating faculty members and by making it impossible for administrators to claim ignorance that Professor Bailyn pressed for the release of the report in March. She also called for all of the schools at M.I.T. to establish committees to monitor gender equity. The deans of the four other schools are working now with female faculty members to set up those committees.

I believe that the public commitment of powerful administrators at M.I.T. -- particularly President Vest -- to eradicate gender bias there by working with female faculty members is a milestone in the long struggle to end gender discrimination in academe. In the end, it will enable M.I.T. to make institutional changes that will alter behaviors at the departmental level even if some hearts and minds lag behind.

The 15 tenured female faculty members in science at M.I.T. who first collected evidence of systematic discrimination against women were highly unpolitical individuals. We were motivated primarily by our desire to facilitate our research and teaching. When some of us resorted to tape measures to quantify the unequal distribution of space between male and female professors, we were seeking only to prepare a study so convincing that no one could deny us equity.

Recently, I asked President Vest why administrators at M.I.T. had worked with the women, accepted the study, and even agreed to

make it public.

"It's the scientific mindset," he replied. "Give us convincing data, and we go with it."

Dean Birgeneau has said he was primarily motivated by a sense of fairness: "The women were being treated unfairly, and this was simply wrong."

It seems surprising that a group of scientists intent only on getting back to the laboratory should have uncovered what appears to be the need for a true social revolution. Civil-rights laws and affirmative action got women in the door of the academy and allowed a few to become highly successful scientists. But, as we have finally learned after 30 years, women were seldom granted equality. Even progressive policies could not completely erase a form of gender discrimination that, as Professor Bailyn wrote, is "subtle but pervasive, and stems largely from unconscious ways of thinking that have been socialized into all of us, men and women alike."

We have known for decades that few women have participated in making the important decisions that shape our universities. Further, as professors of science, we have long known that although we admit nearly equal numbers of male and female students in many areas of science, and although scientific talent and brilliance are equally distributed between the sexes, the career prospects for men and women are not equal. When we began our study, in the summer of 1994, I was amazed that after 25 years of affirmative action, there were only 15 tenured female faculty members in the six departments of science at M.I.T., compared with 194 tenured men. By the time we had finished the study, I was amazed that there were so many tenured women: It is notable that even 15 had succeeded in the face of such odds.

Looking back on what I have learned, I wonder now if there could be a better place for a social revolution to begin than at an institution of science and learning. Perhaps the ability of a handful of science professors to quantify gender bias, and the willingness of a few M.I.T. administrators to support their findings, will help open the way to true equality in the workplace.

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